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Words that Work and Words that Don't: A Guide for Counterterrorism Communication

The following set of suggestions regarding appropriate language for use in conversations with target audiences was developed by the Extremist Messaging Branch of the National Counterterrorism Center [NCTC] and vetted by the interagency "*Themes and Messages*" editorial board at the CTCC. This advice is not binding and is for use with our audiences. It does not affect other areas such as policy papers, research analysis, scholarly writing, etc. The purpose of this paper is to raise awareness among communicators of the language issues that may enhance or detract from successful engagement.

We are also attaching an excellent Homeland Security paper entitled *Terminology to Define the Terrorists: Recommendations from American Muslims*, a guide for USG officials to use to describe terrorists who invoke Islamic theology in planning, carrying out, and justifying their attacks.

Basic Principle: *It's Not What You Say, But What They Hear:*

- **Don't Take the Bait:** When Osama bin Ladin or others try to draw the USG into a debate, we should offer only minimal, if any, response to their messages. When we respond loudly, we raise their prestige in the Muslim world.
- **Don't Compromise Our Credibility:** What al-Qaida and its affiliates do is damning enough without ascribing to al-Qaida and its affiliates motives or goals they have not articulated. Our audiences have more familiarity with the terrorist messages than we do and will immediately spot USG embellishment.
- **Don't Invoke Islam:** Although the al-Qaida network exploits religious sentiments and tries to use religion to justify its actions, we should treat it as an illegitimate political organization, both terrorist and criminal.
- **Don't Harp on Muslim Identity:** Avoid labeling everything 'Muslim.' It reinforces the "U.S. vs. Islam" framework that Al-Qaeda promotes. Be specific (Egyptian, Pakistani) and descriptive (South Asian youth, Arab opinion leaders), where possible.
- **Avoid Ill-Defined and Offensive Terminology:** We are communicating with, not confronting, our audiences. Don't insult or confuse them with pejorative